

History

Southeast Asia has been inhabited for a long time. The earliest ancestors of the region's peoples arrived at least 1.5 million years ago. Modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) have lived in Southeast Asia for at least 40,000 years.

Southeast Asia was an important center of plant domestication. Early peoples grew rice, citrus fruits, and bananas. By about 3000 B.C. rice farming had been established, and people had domesticated buffalo, pigs, and cattle. Evidence indicates that people from southern China began to migrate through the region at least 2,500 years ago. Over time, settlements headed by chiefs grew, and trade developed with China and India. Merchants from India probably introduced Sanskrit writing and Hinduism during this period.

Early Cultures and Settlement

Over the centuries various peoples moved into the region, particularly from China. The largest highly developed culture group in the region was the Khmer (kuh-mer). The Khmer dominated what is now Cambodia beginning in the A.D. 800s. By the end of the 1100s, their empire included most of mainland Southeast Asia. Angkor Wat, a huge temple complex built by the Khmer, reflects their advanced civilization and Hindu religion. In the 1200s the Thais (tyz) migrated from southern China into the Khmer regions. Buddhism, introduced earlier from India and Sri Lanka, spread across mainland Southeast Asia, replacing Hinduism.

Colonialism and Independence

Europeans came to Southeast Asia in the early 1500s. Portuguese and Dutch sailors set up posts for trading in spices and other goods. Traders from Great Britain and France followed. Eventually, most of the region was colonized. Burma (now Myanmar) was a British colony. The French controlled Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, all of which they called Indochine, or French Indochina. Only Siam (now Thailand) was never colonized by Europeans.

During the 1800s the British and French set up plantations for growing export crops. They also built roads and railroads. They set up English- and French-language schools and introduced Christianity. Many Chinese and Indians migrated into the region during this period. They came to work on French and British plantations, mines, and railroads.

The Japanese invaded Southeast Asia during World War II. Only parts of Burma remained free of Japanese control. After the war, nationalist groups in the region tried to end colonialism. Over time four newly independent countries emerged. French Indochina was split into three countries—Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Burma became independent from Britain. In 1989 Burma changed its name to Myanmar.

The transition to independence was not easy. In Vietnam, internal conflict led to a civil war involving the United States. (See Connecting to History: The Vietnam War.) The United States was involved because it wanted to stop the spread of communism in Asia. U.S. policy was based on the domino theory. This was the idea that if one country fell to communism, neighboring countries would follow like falling dominoes. The war in Vietnam also disrupted the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia.

Culture

Each country in the region has one dominant cultural group. These are the Burmans, Thais, Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese. However, there are differences within each group. For example, China has influenced culture in northern Vietnam, while Khmer influences are more pronounced in southern Vietnam. Each of the region's countries is also home to many minority groups. These groups have their own cultures and languages.

People, Languages, and Religion Mainland Southeast Asia has three main language families. They are spoken by the largest ethnic groups. In the west the Burmese speak a Sino-Tibetan language related to Chinese. Languages of the Tai family are spoken in Thailand and Laos. These languages—Thai and Laotian—may have originated in southwestern China. In the east the Vietnamese and Khmer peoples speak languages from the Austro-Asiatic family.

Many of the region's smaller ethnic groups live in mountain areas. In fact, more than 50 ethnic groups live in the Vietnamese highlands. They include the Cham, Yao, Hmong (mong), and Muong. Many of these people have maintained their traditional ways of life. (See Geography for Life: Keeping Traditional Ways of Life in Myanmar.) For example, they practice animism, wear unique clothing and jewelry, and remain cut off from mainstream cultures.

Most of the region's major cities have large Chinese populations. About 14 percent of Thailand's population is ethnic Chinese. In addition, the colonial languages of French and English are often spoken in the region. For example, English has become the language of international business in Southeast Asia. Some people in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos still speak French.

The region's dominant religion is Buddhism. Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar all have large Buddhist majorities. Most of the region's Buddhists practice a form of Buddhism called Theravada. They claim that Theravada, one of 18 major branches of Buddhism, is closest to the Buddha's original teachings. Buddhism and Hinduism coexist in a unique way in Thailand. There Hindu Brahmins lead most of the royal or official ceremonies.

Most Vietnamese practice a mix of Confucianism, which came from China, and Buddhism. Christianity and Islam are also present in the region. Animist religions are common in the highlands of Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar.

Food, Traditions, and Customs In the region's big cities, American fast food restaurants draw many new customers. Still, the most important food throughout mainland Southeast Asia is rice. In most places, rice is part of every meal. Other typical foods are fish and vegetables. Native tropical fruits like bananas, citrus, and durian are also available. Durian is a fruit known for its sweet flavor and unpleasant smell. The durian's odor is so strong, in fact, that some hotels and buses post signs forbidding the fruit. Spices such as ginger and chili peppers add flavor to regional dishes. Lime juice, lemon grass, and coriander add tang. Ground peanuts and coconut milk are other flavorings. Fish sauces are popular throughout the region. These sauces, which have different names in different countries, are based on the liquid poured off of salted, fermented fish. Sometimes chilies or sugar flavor the fish sauce. Spicy sauces with Indian origins called curries are popular in Thailand. Curries usually flavor rice or vegetables. Thais often wash down their spicy food with sugarcane juice. Vietnamese food is particularly varied, with nearly 500 traditional dishes. Some use exotic meats, such as bat or cobra. Plain white rice with various sauces is now typical fare, however.

Buddhism shapes people's lives in mainland Southeast Asia. For example, Thai men often spend time working and serving in monasteries. In Laos, all Buddhist men have traditionally been expected to become monks for a while. One of Myanmar's main holidays is the Festival of Light, which marks an event in the Buddha's life. Paper lanterns light up the streets, and families visit the local shrine. Also in Myanmar, a water festival called Thingyan marks the country's Buddhist New Year. The festival celebrates the cleansing of the soul and washing away of the old year. During this mid-April festival, people in the streets soak each other with water. Since the event falls during the hottest season, the buckets of cold water may be welcome! Other countries celebrate the new lunar year in similar ways.

Throughout the region, cultures of urban and rural areas may differ widely. Many rural people follow the same practices generation after generation. For example, village religious festivals may celebrate local animist beliefs. Country people are more likely to wear garments such as the panung in Thailand and the longyi in Myanmar. A panung is a colorful cotton or silk cloth wrapped tightly around the body. A longyi is a long skirt. Western clothing is common in urban areas.

GROUP 2: Read for your letter on Friday

Early History

Island Southeast Asia is home to descendants of migrants from Asia and other places. Throughout the region's history, seafaring traders and various countries have tried to conquer the area. They wanted to control the region because it had rich resources and a useful location.

Human remains in the Philippines date back more than 30,000 years. The first Malay people from Asia probably migrated into the region about 2000 B.C. They mixed with the peoples who had long lived in the region. Over time, many other peoples came to island Southeast Asia.

Hindus from what is now India influenced the area early in its history. By about A.D. 700, Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms were well established in Java and Sumatra. These kingdoms controlled trade and built huge monuments, including Borobudur in central Java. This temple was completed about A.D. 850. Some of these monuments have been restored.

Majapahit (mah-jah-PAH-hit), the largest early kingdom, existed from the late 1200s to about 1500. Majapahit was centered on the islands of Java and Bali, but controlled many coastal areas. Trade and cities grew throughout the kingdom and the area.

Chinese merchants also sailed their ships long distances to trade among the islands. Some of the merchants then began to settle in coastal cities. Today ethnic Chinese are an important minority in the populations of many island Southeast Asian countries.

By the 1300s Arabs from Southwest Asia were also trading in the region. The Arabs introduced Islam to coastal peoples there, and the religion gradually spread. Areas in northern Sumatra and on the Malay Peninsula became early centers of Islam. Today Islam is island Southeast Asia's main religion.

Colonial Era and Independence

As in many other parts of the world, island Southeast Asia came under the control of European colonial powers. (See Connecting to History: A Colonial History.) The Portuguese, who came in the 1500s, were the first Europeans to arrive. They were searching for spices such as cloves, nutmeg, and pepper and therefore called the area the Spice Islands. In the 1600s and 1700s the Dutch drove out the Portuguese. Portugal lost control of all its lands in the region except the island of Timor.

European Influence The explorer Ferdinand Magellan reached the Philippines in 1521 and claimed the islands for Spain. The Spaniards who followed wanted to Christianize and colonize the islands. Roman Catholicism, the religion brought by the Spaniards, is the main faith of the Philippines today. In addition, Manila became a major port for trade with China and the Spanish colonies in the Americas. In 1898, after the Spanish-American War, the United States took over the Philippines. These islands were the first large overseas U.S. territory.

The Dutch were much less interested than the Spaniards in converting the region's peoples to Christianity. In contrast, the Dutch went to the Spice Islands for commerce. They controlled the spice and tea trade of what became known as the Dutch East Indies. Today these islands make up Indonesia. The Dutch ruled from Batavia—now called Jakarta—their main port on Java.

The British set up colonies in Malaya on the Malay Peninsula and along the northern coast of Borneo. In 1819 they founded Singapore, which became a major port for British and Chinese trade. The British used many local workers to build roads, plantations, and schools. Workers from China and India also came to the plantations. Today Chinese and South Asians make up large ethnic groups in the region.

War and Independence In 1941 and 1942 Japan invaded European and U.S. territories in island Southeast Asia. During World War II the Japanese wanted the region's natural resources, particularly oil. They occupied much of the region until they surrendered at the end of World War II in 1945.

Soon after the war, the Philippines gained independence. The colonial system began to crumble throughout the area. The Dutch tried to reestablish their rule after the war, but the Indonesians resisted. As a result, the Dutch gave up the colony in 1949. Malaya won independence in 1957. Then in 1963 Malaya joined former British territories in Singapore and northern Borneo to form the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore later broke away from Malaysia in 1965. Brunei, a British colony, gained independence in 1984. This tiny country is ruled by a sultan. A sultan is the ruler of a Muslim country.

Culture

People and Languages

A history of migration and colonization has created a diverse population in island Southeast Asia. People from many different ethnic groups live in the region. In Indonesia, no one ethnic group makes up a clear majority of the population. Nearly half of Indonesians are Javanese. Malays and others make up large minority groups.

Malaysia's population is somewhat less diverse. Nearly 60 percent of Malaysians are ethnic Malay. Still, this country also has large minority groups, like the descendants of Chinese migrants. In fact, ethnic Chinese and South Asians dominate much of Malaysia's economy.

Chinese live throughout the region, particularly in large cities. In Singapore, Chinese make up a majority—more than 75 percent of the population. Tensions between the city's mostly Chinese population and the Malays in Malaysia led Singapore to seek independence in 1965.

Each country in the region has one or more official languages. For example, Singapore has four official languages, including English and Malay. Chinese dialects are spoken in many large cities. In addition, indigenous peoples throughout the region speak local languages.

The Philippines is the region's most homogeneous (hoh-muh-JEE-nee-uhs) country. The word homogeneous means "of the same kind." More than 90 percent of the country's people are ethnic

Malays. Pilipino, which is based on a native language called Tagalog, is one of the Philippines' official languages. English is also an official language in this former U.S. territory.

Settlement and Land Use

Island Southeast Asia's population is not evenly distributed. For example, Java has more than half of Indonesia's population of about 225 million. The Javanese live on an island smaller than New York State, which has fewer than 20 million people. The Indonesian government encourages citizens to move to less-populated islands. Between 1969 and 1994, some 8.5 million Indonesians were relocated. This policy has not been popular with the residents of those islands, however.

The country of Singapore, which occupies a small island, is almost completely urban. About 70 percent of tiny Brunei's people also live in cities. The larger countries are more rural. Many people are farmers. About a third of Indonesians and half of Malaysians and Filipinos live in cities. Still, many people are moving from rural areas to cities in search of work. Two of the most populous cities are Jakarta and Manila.

Religion

As you have read, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam have long been practiced in the region. Indonesia is the world's most populous Islamic country. Nearly 90 percent of its people are Muslims. Hinduism is practiced in some areas, such as on the Indonesian island of Bali. Buddhism is most common in Malaysia and Singapore, where many Chinese live. Europeans brought Christianity, and today Christians live throughout the region. In the Philippines Christians make up more than 90 percent of the population.

Food

Farmers grow many kinds of foods in the region. However, rice is the main food crop, or staple, for most of the people. Rice is served with many other foods and spices, such as curries and chili peppers.

Growing Rice

Farmers in the region grow rice in three ways. Wet-rice, or paddy, cultivation is the most productive and common method. Rice paddies are constructed with dikes in lowland areas or with mud terraces in hilly areas. Water flow down steep slopes is controlled, and erosion is limited. This, along with the area's warm and wet climate, allows farmers to grow more than one rice crop each year.

Paddy cultivation is a form of intensive agriculture. Many workers are needed to harvest a particular crop. This type of rice farming supports large concentrated populations in island and mainland Southeast Asia. In addition, farmers can raise ducks, fish, and shrimp in the paddies. These food sources add protein to the diet. Paddy workers may use the water buffalo, a domesticated animal, for plowing and heavy farm duties. In the tropical wet-and-dry climate areas, farmers use dry-rice cultivation. Farmers plow fields and plant rice seeds. Rivers may flood the area during the wet season. People practice a third type of rice cultivation in forested areas. This method is known as slash-and-burn agriculture, a form of shifting cultivation. Farmers clear or slash small areas of forest

and burn the fallen trees. After a few years the soil's nutrients have been used up, and farmers move on to a new area. Dry farming and slash-and-burn agriculture are also used throughout the region to grow many other crops.

Other Traditions and Education

Many traditional clothing styles are still worn partly because they are ideal for the region's hot humid climates. For example, for business and other important occasions, Filipino men wear the barong tagalog. This light shirt is made from cotton or from fibers of the banana or pineapple plant. Malaysian men and women often wear sarongs. They wrap these long strips of cloth around their bodies.

People in the region use special methods to make some traditional clothing. For example, Indonesians create colorful fabrics called batiks (buh-TEEKS). Coating areas of the cloth with wax creates patterns on a batik. Uncoated areas can then be dyed with bright colors.

Education is a key to the region's future prosperity. To aid economic development, governments have tried to improve educational opportunities for all people. Schools have also been used to create a sense of national identity in the region's multiethnic countries. For example, in the Philippines the Pilipino language is used more and more in schools. Indonesian schools emphasize what are called the Pancasila, or "Five Principles." Indonesia's early leaders believed their new country should be based on those principles. One of the principles is the importance of national unity among the country's many ethnic groups. The others are belief in one God, a just and civilized humanity, democracy, and social justice.